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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION EXPLOITS ROH'S SUICIDE TO CREATE OPENING

REF: SEOUL 0653 (INSTITUTIONALIZING THE OPPOSITION)

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary: South Korean domestic politics remain in a quagmire with President Lee Myung-bak incapable of doing much despite his party's (the Grand National Party) firm numerical control of the National Assembly. Most recently, opposition parties are trying to leverage former President Roh Moo-hyun's suicide and the government's perceived suppression of public sympathy to portray President Lee Myung-bak as a "dictator." The opposition struck a chord with the public by championing people's right to express their feelings in street demonstrations -- a ritual dear to Koreans but suppressed by Lee. So far leaders of the largest opposition Democratic Party have been unable to parlay public sympathy for Roh into political support, but their efforts will extend the party's ability to block Lee's domestic agenda in the National Assembly. Longer term, Lee will have to find a way to accommodate the public's desire to express its opinion, or risk a backlash. The opposition too, with no hope of gaining meaningful power in the National Assembly until 2012 elections and with public sympathy for Roh's suicide dissipating, runs the risk of being seen as obstructionist if it can not find consensus with Lee on bread-and-butter issues like the economy and education. Legislative paralysis is likely until one side or the other amasses enough political capital to change the status quo. Our longer term assessment is that President Lee and the Grand National Party (GNP) have a lot more to lose than the opposition from the continued stalemate. End Summary.

LMB as Dictator

12. (C) In the aftermath of former President Roh's suicide, President Lee's opponents are working to solidify an image of him as a dictator reminiscent of Korea's post-war authoritarian regimes. Former President Kim Dae-jung, speaking at a June 11 event commemorating his June 2000 summit with Kim Jong-il, implored an audience of some 1,000 supporters to be vigilant in opposing dictatorship in the ROK and several times suggested that Lee's administration had become just that.

13. (C) While conservative politicians and media quickly defended President Lee by pointing out the obvious -- how could Lee Myung-bak possibly be a dictator when there were so many public protests and critical press reports -- the government's suppression of street demonstrations and efforts to restrict civic organizations have struck a chord among some Koreans as being undemocratic and even autocratic. Mass protests, used in the past by the Korean public to force democracy on unwilling post-war dictatorial regimes, are a cultural ritual Lee has moved aggressively to curtail. After

suffering severe political wounds from the anti-government candlelight protests of May and June 2008, Lee directed the police to be aggressive in enforcing existing laws regulating street demonstrations. Police have since revised their standard operating procedures to preemptively detain protest leaders who have not, as the law requires, received approval for a demonstration.

¶4. (C) Public outpouring of sympathy in the wake of Roh's suicide presented the Lee administration with its toughest protest challenge since last year's anti-government candlelight vigils. This year, the police were successful in shutting down large-scale anti-government protests with an overwhelming show of force in central Seoul. But the effort required by the police to maintain order highlighted a broad based frustration at not having an outlet to voice dissatisfaction with the government.

¶5. (C) Lee's opponents cite a number of other examples of Lee's dictatorial tendency.

-- After ten years of government largesse toward left-of-center civil society groups during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, the Lee administration disqualified 25 organizations in 2008 and 1,842 in 2009 from receiving government support for allegedly supporting illegal violence.

-- Prosecutors indicted the producers of the MBC-TV network's documentary on mad cow disease that sparked the May-June 2008 anti-government candlelight protests.

-- President Lee replaced the Roh Moo-hyun-appointed heads of two influential public broadcasters, KBS and YTN, with like-minded supporters.

-- Five protestors and a police officer died on January 20, 2009 when the protestors' stash of Molotov cocktails ignited in a police raid on a building designated for demolition in Yongsan, central Seoul.

Domestic Paralysis

¶6. (C) Despite being outnumbered 170-84 (as of May 26) in the National Assembly, the opposition Democratic Party (DP) has managed to block much of President Lee's and the ruling GNP's domestic agenda -- relying on the public's support of an unwritten requirement for consensus to pass substantive legislation (ref A); in the ROK National Assembly context, "consensus" generally means that the opposition agrees before legislation is submitted for committee and plenary votes.

¶7. (C) Poll numbers reflect the deadlock. Neither President Lee nor the political parties have the estimated 40 percent approval ratings necessary to set the agenda. The DP has gained at the GNP's expense since Roh's suicide, but not enough to win the upper hand. President Lee does not appear to have yet suffered as much polling damage from Roh's suicide as the GNP and has recovered from his lows of last year, but at 30 percent he is weak.

¶8. (U) Following is historical polling data from the Korea Society Opinion Institute that reflects, with some gaps, data on President's Lee's approval ratings from the beginning of Lee's administration in February 2008 and party approval

ratings from the seating of the current National Assembly in May 2008.

	LMB	GNP	DP
03/08	48.1		
04/08	45.0		
05/08	24.9	36.9	13.3
06/08	15.2	27.1	12.9
07/08	18.5		

08/08	29.2		
09/08	24.5	34.4	10.9
10/08	24.0		
11/08	23.7		
12/08	31.9	31.7	10.9
01/09	24.3	26.9	13.2
02/09	28.6	33.0	12.3
03/09	33.6	34.0	12.1
04/09	32.7	31.4	13.0
05/09	30.6	21.5	20.8

¶9. (C) The DP is using its new strength to block the opening of the June session of the National Assembly. The June 1 opening was originally delayed due to Roh's funeral on May ¶29. Now the DP is demanding an apology from President Lee for Roh's death and an investigation into Roh's prosecution as conditions for agreeing to reconvene the National Assembly. Our sources on both sides of the aisle, thought the DP would soften its demands and agree to open the Assembly later in the month, but the DP leadership announced June 14 that it would not consider reconvening until Lee returns to Korea from his June 16 Washington summit with President Obama.

Risks and Opportunities

¶10. (C) President Lee, who has said he dislikes the give and take of the political process, risks cementing his image as an out-of-touch president -- even an autocrat -- unless he can find a way to meaningfully engage the public on his domestic agenda. A natural starting point would be to forge reconciliation with the disaffected members of his own party who have aligned themselves with Park Geun-hye. If he cannot win over alienated members of the GNP, there is little chance of winning left-leaning independents. An improving economy would strengthen his hand as would adept management of a crisis provoked by the DPRK.

¶11. (C) The DP, whose leadership had abandoned Roh by the time he left office in February 2008, risks being branded with political opportunism if it is seen as exploiting Roh's suicide. For the party to extend its recent approval rating gains, it will have to develop a positive agenda beyond obstructing Lee and the GNP, but, after being routed in the 2007 presidential election and 2008 National Assembly elections, the party is still searching for new leadership and a winning platform. A political misstep by Lee (like the timing of his decision last year to open the market to U.S. beef) or an unexpected event (like Roh's suicide) could alter the equation considerably in the DP's favor. If the DP can galvanize anti-government populist voices, even with a minority in the National Assembly, it would effectively control the domestic agenda -- a grim scenario for President Lee.

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